

ON MARRIAGE – Part 1
Song of Solomon

I have always viewed preaching as "public counseling" and counseling as "private preaching." With that in mind, I would like for us to begin, this morning, a series on marriage...a series of **public counseling courses** aimed at helping us all in our marriages. When this series comes to an end, then we will spend the rest of my tenure as senior pastor on Matthew chapters 5, 6 and 7: The Sermon on the Mount. But allow me to first make a few comments about all of this...

Someone asked me a few weeks back what **my goals** were for the next 18 months – that period of time leading up to my retiring as full time senior pastor here at Burning Hearts. I said that my goals have been quite consistently to

1. See Burning Hearts be in a good place in regards to its facility, its leaders, its staffing and its spirit, so that what is being "handed off" to the next senior pastor is a church that is in really good condition.
2. I personally desire to **end strong, really strong**. Many years ago I met a fellow who had served, for a brief time, as a pastor. He said to me, at that time, that his attitude towards pastoring was that "You work real hard for 2 or 3 years and then you just slide." I was aghast at his comment and only could think, at the time, that I had little in common with this man.

I have compared my pastoring to a fellow on a relay team and we're running a very long race. I have been running my leg of the race and it is now about time to pass the baton on to the next runner. When the race is finally over I don't want to hear, "Well, Winne was really fading, so the next runner had to try and make up for that loss." No, what I want to hear is that from the start to the finish of **my leg** of that relay race, **I set a pace that those who followed could only just hope to try and match.**

But I'm coming down to the end. I am very, very conscious of this. And with every funeral I attend (I attended yet another one just yesterday) I am reminded that none of us are promised a tomorrow. So if we are going to do something...anything...we need to do it today.

Marriage.

Please turn to the book of Song of Solomon (also called Song of Songs). It is right after Ecclesiastes, the last of the so-called "Wisdom Literature" books of the Bible.

It had been my hope to actually have a couple – a husband and wife – read the entire book of Song of Solomon (all 8 chapters) back and forth to one another, as that is how it is meant to be read. But given the rather graphic descriptions that are used by the husband and wife to describe each other's bodies, it was impressed upon me that I should pursue another plan.

So we are NOT going to read all of Song of Solomon, but we will **read parts** of it and based upon those parts make some application to all: the married and to those who are single.

It has been said that what wives want most from their husbands is **to be loved**, while what husbands want most from their wives is **to be respected**. In Ephesians chapter 5 the apostle Paul clearly picks up on this when he challenges husbands to LOVE their wives, while to the wives he challenges them to RESPECT or SUBMIT to their husbands. It is not that husbands don't also need love. It is just that guys are different than their wives. On this Father's Day a good question for any wife here is whether or not your husband feels as though you respect him. For respect is the very best gift you could give to your man. And to the men: does your wife FEEL loved? Because that is what she most desires from you.

In Song of Solomon, Solomon uses **very graphic language** to describe his wife, a wife who was apparently black (see 1:5) or at least very dark complexioned. Solomon heaps on her praise for her beauty...

1:8-10

If Solomon's praise went only as far down as her cheeks and neck, I probably could have had us read this book in its entirety. But, as you likely know (if you have ever read this book), Solomon later continues to describe the female anatomy further down...below the neck.

But both the husband and the wife have good things to say about each other...

1:15-16a

Many years ago I was meeting with a couple looking to be married. It was that time of doing "premarital counseling." After having met with the couple several times the fellow contacted me and asked if he might **meet with me privately**. I agreed. He didn't say what he wanted to meet about so when we finally met I had no idea where the conversation was going to go. It was at that time that he said to me, speaking of the woman that he was about to marry,

"The truth is, I'm not physically attracted to her." I had never run into that before. The wife was, from my perspective, pleasant to look at: full of vitality and very bright. Maybe she was not a beauty queen but certainly she was not unattractive.

We talked about this for some time. In the end they did marry, they had children, and now, some 30 or so years later, they are still married.

But by and large it would seem **there should be some physical ATTRACTION to the other person**. Some people's attractiveness is, however, NOT in their body or in their beauty, but in their wit or their brain.

The Twilight Zone, long ago, did a spoof on this with a fellow fantasizing what he wanted in a wife: she would be **stunningly beautiful** and **would dote over him** all the time. Well, in the Twilight Zone, what he had wished for he got but within a very short time he wished he could be rid of her!

For beauty is more than skin deep.

Proverbs 31:30-31

Beauty doesn't last. Joan Rivers, well into her 70s and beyond, was having major plastic surgery done to her face. Granted, it did make her look younger, but in the end, it was that very procedure that led to her death (or so her family has charged).

We age.

We may try and deny it, suggesting that "like wine we only get better with age." But the truth is, **wine does not get better with age**. There are good years for wine makers and bad years, and the only reason why a wine from 1973 may be better than a wine from 2005 is that 1973 was a VERY GOOD YEAR for that wine maker. But beauty fades.

Character, however, doesn't fade.

Like Jean Valjean, from Victor Hugo's classic work, *Les Miserables*, we can become better people as the years go by.

As the years progress, no longer may a woman's breasts be like towers (8:10) or a man's body be like polished ivory (5:14). As Ruth's grandmother used to say, "gravity gets you...it just pulls you down." And be it a man or a woman we eventually **all tend to suffer from chest and drawers disease** – that's when our chest drops into our drawers.

Or how about that man that was looking at himself in the mirror and while his wife was observing he made the comment, "I have the body of a Greek god." The wife smiled and then quipped, "Sorry to tell you but Buddha was not Greek."

Yes, chest in drawers disease. As time goes by, the beauty of these bodies fade.

So, what are we to make of this tit for tat praising of each other's bodies that we have here in the book of Song of Solomon?

1. I think we see here a couple who are open with each other, both physically and verbally. The husband could not be describing his wife's body if he had never seen his wife's body.

We have all been raised differently. Modesty is cultural and even within a given society it may differ, family to family.

Long ago, it was not unusual for an entire family to be sleeping in the same bed. In Herman Melville's classic book, *Moby Dick*, right at the beginning of the book Ishmael gets lodging at an inn, but there he must share the bed with a man whom he did not know and had never met.

In the 18th century it was not uncommon for people to invite guests into their bedrooms and there converse, while the owner of the house was still in bed, over issues

of business or political life.

All this to say that what one person may be expecting in terms of modesty IN MARRIAGE may not meet what the other person was expecting.

But when modesty is such that one's marriage partner does not or **has not even seen one's spouse**, something seems wrong. For Solomon certainly knew what his wife looked like and she knew what he looked like as well.

2. I believe we need to learn to praise the other. Okay, maybe you also didn't marry a beauty queen, or you, the wife, have Buddha for your man. But we each desire to hear from the one we love that we are loved.

When George Bush was running against Al Gore for the presidency of the United States, and the whole election process came to a grinding halt over the votes in Florida (many of you will recall this), George Bush was asked by a reporter how he would handle it if he lost. He said at that time that he would be alright for, as he went on to say, "I have been shown nothing but unconditional love by my parents from the time I was born."

That is, George Bush had such a **DEEP RESERVOIR of love** that he knew it would keep him from running dry.

Have you expressed your love or admiration for your wife or husband lately?

When any of us in our family have a birthday and family members are gathered around we will usually have a meal, and then eat some cake, and then open some presents. But somewhere in there (and this was Ruth's idea long ago) we will go around the room and each will share **what they appreciate** about the person who is having the birthday. We have, through the years, stressed that when speaking of the person who is having the birthday **we should look directly at them** and tell them what we appreciate about them. When the children were little their comments were quite similar:

- I appreciate you because you play games with me
- I appreciate you because you read to me
- I appreciate you because you buy me things

Their appreciation was all wrapped up in themselves. But as they grew older they learned to express appreciation for and to the person for what that person was: maybe for their character, or their creativity, their godliness or their patience.

I have told you before about my delight in taking dancing lessons with Ruth. This was now several years ago (they are currently still closed down due to COVID). And what I appreciated was that for the first time in a very long time we were standing very close to one another, looking at one another, in the eye.

In his classic play, *Our Town*, playwright Thornton Wilder sets up a scenario in which a deceased girl named Emily returns to observe life in the town in which she once had lived. Among her many observations is this: that **rarely do people really look at one another when they talk to them.**

Song of Solomon shows that this husband and wife had clearly looked at one another. And now, as they talk to one another and express their feelings of love and respect for one another, it is hard to imagine this happening without them looking at one another in the eye.

3. We should never forget that sex has its proper context.

Three times in the book of Song of Solomon we find a repeated phrase. If we had actually had a couple read Song of Solomon to each other there would have been a couple other people who would have, three times, repeated a challenge. Indeed, one cannot help but wonder if this thrice repeated line is actually the MAIN point of the entire book. We read this line in...

Chapter 2, verse 7

Chapter 3, verse 5, and

Chapter 8, verse 3.

Let's read the first of these: 2:7

The point of this thrice repeated line is clear: there is a **proper time** for the arousing of love and there is also an **inappropriate time**. The trouble in our modern society is that **all restraints have been cast aside** and so anytime seems the right time to arouse the passions of love with whoever one might be with. The end result of this has been disastrous:

- couples giving up a part of their being...their soul...to another without any commitment from that other, leaving each with less than a whole heart to eventually give to a life-long spouse
- unplanned and unwanted pregnancies, which, if carried full term, can almost guarantee a life of impoverishment and welfare for the mother and child
- abortions of the unplanned and unwanted: mass genocide.
- a loss of innocence in the society as a whole, and
- a loss of any sense of sin before a holy Almighty God

We now have children raising children and the results are not good. It was only a few years ago when my wife, Ruth, commented that of the 27 students in her kindergarten class, only 2 came from homes where the mother and father of that child lived together and were actually married. Fornication is a word no longer used while it is common, indeed more common than not, to learn of singles living with each other, **without marriage and without commitment**.

If you are single, **don't cheat yourself** or that one that interests you. Don't arouse love until it is the right time. And the right time for arousal is **within the context of marriage**. Like living on a budget, this may seem hard but it is what brings true freedom.

Lastly this morning...

4. Song of Solomon is a call for a husband and wife to "come away" with each other.

We see this language of invitation, one to the other, several times in the book.

"Arise, my love, my beautiful one, and **come away**," the husband calls to his wife in chapter 2, verse 10.

"Come, my beloved," the bride calls back to her husband in chapter 7, verse 11.

These two want to spend time with each other.

I read one time that the Puritan preachers of New England, back in the 17th and early 18th centuries, preached more from the book of Song of Solomon than any other book in the Bible. I don't know that that is true. But if it is true it is because they viewed the book not merely as a semi-erotic poem about a husband and his bride, but because they believed it was **ultimately an overview of Christ's love for his church.**

If that actually is the intent of the book (and I believe that is questionable) it makes this call to "come away" and spend time with our Savior all the more meaningful. He WANTS to spend time with us. Will we spend time with him?

In his now famous little booklet, My Heart, Christ's Home, author Robert Munger writes a fictitious account about Jesus arriving at a man's house, being invited in, and being shown around the house. The house is a metaphor for the man's life. On the first floor of the home is a study, and there, every morning, Jesus waits for the man to come down and spend time with him. Sometimes the man shows up; sometimes he doesn't.

But Christ is calling each of us to "come away" and spend time with him. We call this "the devotional life."

In the Song of Solomon, it is the husband and wife that mutually call to the other to "come away" and spend time with each other. I want to encourage you to do just that today, this Father's Day.

Spend time with each other. Turn off the television and go for a walk, or a hike, or play a game of corn hole. Ruth loves to play corn hole; she is so good at it. She wumps me every time.

But spend time with each other,
Talk with one another,
Look into each other's eyes, and
Express your admiration and love each for the other.

May God bless the marriages here at Burning Hearts. Amen? Amen.